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ABSTRACT

The study investigated the ranking of stress associated with various life events by parents of handicapped children. Forty-seven parents of children with handicapping conditions were administered the Social Readjustment Rating Questionnaire. Mean values and ranks for life event items were compared with previously reported data. Overall ranking by the parent group was highly similar to other groups, but specific items of particular importance were weighted and ranked differently. Items associated with childbirth and child care were identified as high stress items as were financial items. Tables presenting study statistics are appended. (Author/DB)

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Social Adjustment of Parents of Persons with Handicapping Conditions

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The College of Saint Rose, Albany

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Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the New England Educational Research Organization, Lenox, Massachusetts, April, 1981.

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Abstract

Forty-seven parents of children with handicapping conditions were administered the Social Readjustment Rating Questionnaire. Mean values and ranks for items were compared with previously reported data. Overall ranking by the parent group was highly similar to other groups, but specific items of particular import (e.g. pregnancy) were weighted and ranked differently.

SOCIAL ADJUSTMENT OF PARENTS OF PERSONS WITH HANDICAPPING CONDITIONS

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Recent research on adult development indicates that life events are significant markers for developmental change. Consensus among researchers on the significance of particular life events is relatively strong. Marriage, birth of first child, divorce, death of spouse, and departure of last child from the family residence are such significant life events. Since most adults experience a number of similar life events, it has been possible to examine individual and group adaptation to these events (Boureque and Back, 1977; Zubrod, Note 1).

Understanding the individual and group adaptive responses is essential for both theoretical formulations of adult development and application of therapeutic and educational intervention programs. The effect on adult development of rearing a child with a handicapping condition is mostly unknown. Anecdotal, personal records of this experience exist in the literature (see Lonsdale, 1978) but systematic information that is generalizable to a larger population and that would be useful in determining policy for support services is limited.

Research over the last decade on the course of adult development (Baltes, Reese, & Lipsitt, 1980; Boureque & Back, 1977; Maas & Kuypers, 1974; Neugarten, 1976, 1977; Vaillant, 1978; Zubrod, Note 1) offers an emerging picture of what Baltes (1979) terms normative age-graded and normative history-graded experiences

for the general population. These age and history graded life events serve as markers by which individuals judge their own lives to be on-time or off-time (Neugarten, 1976).

Not clearly reflected in the literature is the influence on development of what Baltes (1979) calls non-normative life events; events not experienced by all or most people. Having a child with a handicapping condition is such a non-normative life event. Like the pebble in the pond, the introduction of a handicapped child into one's life space can be assumed to influence a widening circle of other life events. This study is an initial attempt to describe what events in the life of the parent are affected and how much.

While parenting a child with a handicapping condition is a non-normative life event for the general population, it is a normative life event in the sub-set of the population of parents of children with handicapping conditions. Systematic information concerning this sub-population is needed both to inform public policy decisions and to expand our understanding of adult development in general.

Holes and Rahe (1967) have developed the Social Readjustment Rating Questionnaire (SRRQ) which measures the perceived adjustment specified life events require of individuals. The assumptions underlying their instrument are that both socially desirable and socially undesirable life events force change in the on-going life patterns of persons and that the degree of change required can be quantified by asking individuals to assign a weighted number to specified life events. Research with the SRRQ has demonstrated high inter-correlations among groups on the ranking of stressful life events (Holmes and

Masuda, 1974; Masuda and Holmes, 1978). Correlations range from .82 to .97 across such groups as male/female; single/married; over 30/under 30; lower class/middle class; Protestant/Jewish; Black/White. They have also demonstrated that different cultural groups rank the same life event differently. In a comparison between American and Japanese samples they found these interesting differences in ranking: "Major change in health of family member," Am (12); J (9). "Addition of new family member," Am (13), J (23). "Major changes in arguments with spouse," (Am (16); J (13.5). "Son or daughter leaving home," Am (22); J (18).

The hypothesis of this study is that the special demands of parenting a handicapped person significantly influence adaptive responsives across the broad spectrum of life events in such a way that the ranking of life events by such parents will be significantly different from the rankings assigned by the Holmes and Masuda American sample.

Method

Subjects. The participants in this study were 47 parents of children with handicapping conditions (physical disabilities, mental retardation, learning disabilities, speech and hearing impairments, and emotional handicaps). The sample reported the following demographic characteristics: (1) reporting parent's sex: 5 males, 41 females, 1 both parents; (2) family income: 14 less than $10,000, 9 between $10,000-$15,000, 23 greater than $15,000, and 1 no response; (3) level of education: 1 eighth grade, 19 high school, 25 college, 2 no response; (4) sex of handicapped child: 27 male, 21 female, 1 no response; (5) non-handicapped siblings in the home:

42 reported one or more non-handicapped siblings lived in the household, 4 reported no non-handicapped siblings lived in the household, 1 no response; and (6) category of disability: 21 mentally retarded, 5 learning disabled, 8 physical disabilities, 13 speech and hearing impairments, 2 emotionally handicapped, and 2 not labelled.

Instrument. The Social Readjustment Rating Questionnaire (SRRQ), a paper and pencil test, designed by Holmes and Rahe (1967) was used. The SRRQ was designed to measure a cluster of perceived need for social readjustment required by events associated with life stress: emotional stress, object loss, etc. The SRRQ asks the respondant to assign a numerical value which reflects the intensity and duration of readjustment required by each of the 42 listed life events. "Marriage" is given an arbitrary value of 500 as an anchor score. The questionnaire and cover letter are appended. Reported test-retest (9 months) reliability coefficients range from .64 to .74 (Holmes and Masuda, 1974).

Procedure. The SRRQ was piloted with two parent groups. There was a low return rate and the cover letter and instructions were simplified in response to comments offered by parent leaders.

The study was conducted in the tri-county region of upper New York State served by the Board of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) of Albany-Schenectady-Schoharie counties. Initially, the Director of Special Education for this BOCES region was contacted and agreed to have the study conducted within the agency's jurisdiction. Four hundred-thirty Social Readjustment Rating Questionnaires, accompanied by a demographic questionnaire, a cover letter, and a stamped self-addressed return envelope (see Appendix) were

submitted to the BOCES special education director who distributed the materials to the parents of all of the children served within the agency's special education program with the exception of those children who attend skills development classes for the mildly handicapped. Based upon previous experience with the parent population and current BOCES policy, the director advised against using the mail to distribute the questionnaire. Instead, the instruments were administratively distributed to the children who brought them home in their lunch pails. Although this procedure is not optimal, it represented the only viable alternative for conducting this survey at this time. Questionnaires were filled out by the parents and mailed in pre-addressed, stamped envelopes to the researchers.

Analysis. Mean scores and standard deviantions and range for each questionnaire item were calculated. Items were ranked according to mean value. Spearman's rho was calculated between the rankings of the Holmes and Rahe (1967) American sample and the parent sample. Items differing by at least 5 ranks were compared with data on other sub-populations reported by Masuda and Holmes (1978).

Results

Of the 430 questionnaires distributed, 56 were returned, a return rate of 13%. Forty-six returns were useable. Demographics of the subjects are described above (See Subjects).

In Table 1 are the ranks and mean values attributed to each listed life event by (a) the current sample of parents of children with handicapping conditions and (b) the original American sample reported by Holmes and Rahe

(1967). The Spearman Rank-Order correlation (.93) was significant, $z = 6.03$,

Insert Table 1 about here

$p < .01$. Rankings across the 42 life events reflected a general ordering very similar to the original Holmes and Rahe group. In both Death of spouse ranked number 1, Personal injury or sickness ranked 6, Death of a close friend ranked 17/18, Mortgage over $10,000 ranked 20, Son or daughter leaving home ranked 23, Vacation ranked 41 and Minor violation of the law ranked 43. However, within the general consensus there were several large differences. The parent sample weighted 13 life events higher than marriage in required readjustment. The 1967 sample ranked 6 life events ahead of marriage. In Table 2 are listed the comparative ranks for 7 life events by the parent sample, the 1967 Holmes and Rahe sample, and two other samples (American and Japanese) reported by Holmes and Masuda (1974). The parent sample elevated events related to

Insert Table 2 about here

children and financial concerns above marriage in need for readjustment. Other life events which show wide differences in ranking seem to reflect stronger reactions to changes in daily living on the part of the parents than other groups.

The mean scores, standard deviations and range for each listed life event are in Table 3. Two sets of scores are listed for some items on which extreme

Insert Table 3 about here

scores greatly skewed the mean. The extracted scores are in parentheses. The number varies on some items because some respondants did not weight all items.

Discussion

The 13% return rate of the study severely limits the generalizability of the findings. The sample is badly skewed in favor of female, college educated parents. However, the high correlation with the 1967 sample suggests that the parent sample is representative of the larger social ethic which permeates this historical period. Masuda and Holmes (1978) and Holmes and Masuda (1974) report high correlation with the 1967 sample among rankings on the SRRQ across many different cultural, racial, age and sex samples. They suggest that differences among groups are revealed by the items which are ranked quite differently across the different groups. To the extent that the parent sample can be viewed as representative of parents of handicapped children, those differences suggest important influences on the adult development of these parents. Items associated with childbirth and child care are high stress items, as are financial items. Although low in overall rank, items reflecting need to adjust to changes in daily living are ranked much higher by the parents than by other tested groups. Perhaps even more influential is the large number of life events weighted higher in adjustment need than marriage by the parent group. It seems reasonable to assume that parenting a handicapped child is the factor influencing the parent group, in contrast to the other groups, to

perceive pregnancy, the addition of a new family member and financial events as requiring more need for readjustment than marriage.

Friedrich (1979) reports that marital satisfaction is the best predictor of the coping behavior of mothers of handicapped children. A large proportion of the parent sample are single parents (Daly, Note 2). Counselling of the family with a handicapped child that concentrated on the marriage adjustment, rather than adjusting to the handicapped child warrants study.

Future studies will need to find ways to lower the resistance of this population to disclose personal information. Written and oral communications to the authors and to the cooperating BOCES director indicate a serious reluctance to participate in this kind of research. Parents indicated skepticism regarding the purpose and anonymity of the questionnaire. In an era of advocacy, they appear child-centered and pragmatic. Studies of parents which lead to long range changes in social policy seem remote and unreal to them.

Although limited by the non-random sample, this study offers sufficient indication of which events are experienced differently in the life course of parents of handicapped children to encourage further research. Studies explaining the non-normative experience contribute to our understanding of adult development in general, as will as to the development of the sample studied.

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Table 1

Ranks and Mean Values of SRRQ Items for Two Groups

SRRQ item	Group			
	Parents with handicapped Child		American Sample (a)	
	Rank	Mean Value/10	Rank	Mean Value/10
Death of spouse	1	90	1	100
Jail term	2	74	4.5	63
Divorce	3.5	73	2	73
Death of a family member	3.5	73	4.5	63
Marital separation	5	70	3	65
Personal injury or illness	6	66	6	53
Pregnancy	7	60	12	40
Gain new family member	8	58	14	39
Change in health of family member	9	55	11	44
Fired at work	10	54	8	47
Change in financial state	11.5	52	16	38
Foreclosure of mortgage	11.5	52	21	30
Business readjustment	13	51	15	39
Marriage	14	50	7	50
Marital reconciliation	15	47	9.5	45
Retirement	16.5	45	9.5	45
Change in number of arguments with spouse	16.5	45	19	35
Death of close friend	18	44	17	37

Table 1 cont.

Ranks and Mean Values of SRRQ

Items for Two Groups

SRRQ item	Group			
	Parents with handicapped Child		American Sample (a)	
	Rank	Mean Value/10	Rank	Mean Value/10
Mortgage over $10,000	19.5	43	20	31
Sex difficulties	19.5	43	14	39
Change in residence	21	40	32	20
Son or daughter leaving home	22.5	39	23	29
Change in living conditions	22.5	39	28	25
Change in responsibilities at work	24.5	38	23	29
Change to different line of work	24.5	38	18	36
Begin or end school	26	37	26.5	26
Outstanding personal achievement	27	36	25	28
Wife begin or stop work	28	35	26.5	26
Change in work habits or conditions	29.5	34	32	20
Change in schools	29.5	34	32	20
Trouble with in-laws	31	30	23	29
Revision of personal habits	33	29	29	24
Trouble with boss	33	29	30	23
Change in sleep habits	33	29	38	16
Change in eating habits	35	28	39.5	15
Christmas	36	27	42	12
Change in social activities	37.5	26	36	18

Table 1 cont.

Ranks and Mean Values of SRRQ

Items for Two Groups

SRRQ item	Group			
	Parents with handicapped Child		American Sample (a)	
	Rank	Mean Value/10	Rank	Mean Value/10
Change in # of family get-togethers	37.5	26	39.5	15
Mortgage or loan less than $10,000	39.5	25	37	17
Change in recreation	39.5	25	34.5	19
Change in church activities	41.5	24	34.5	19
Vacation	41.5	24	41	13
Minor violations of the law	43	19	43	11

(a) From Holmes and Rahe, 1967.

Table 2

Ranking of Six Items from the SRRQ

by Four Different Samples

SRRQ Item	Group			
	Parent with handicapped child	American (a)	American (b)	Japanese (b)
Marriage	14	7	4	6
Pregnancy	7	12	19	13.5
Gain new family member	8	14	13	23
Change in residence	21	33	33	37
Change in living conditions	22	28	29	26
Change in sleeping habits	33	38	37	35
Change in eating habits	35	40	38.5	36

(a) From Holmes and Rahe, 1967.

(b) From Holmes and Masuda, 1974.

Table 3

Means, Standard Deviations and Ranges

of SRRQ Items: Parents with Handicapped Children

Item Number	N	Mean	S.D.	Range
1.	46	500	(Anchor Item)	
2.	46	286.08	233.93	0-1000
3.	45	744.44	727.25	0-5000
	46	1004.35	1540.27	(10,000)*
4.	45	897.78	676.97	0-5000
	46	1115.22	1492.31	(10,000)
5.	46	293.48	213.08	0- 750
6.	46	732.61	474.13	100-3000
7.	46	282.06	240.18	0-1000
8.	46	518.48	264.65	0-1000
9.	46	290.65	230.31	0- 800
10.	45	438.89	226.86	0-1000
	46	546.74	527.09	(2500)
11.	45	190.67	211.17	0- 750
12.	45	362.22	225.42	0- 800
13.	46	598.37	273.48	0-1000
14.	46	553.80	212.26	200-1000
15.	46	433.70	221.12	0-1000
16.	46	303.80	233.33	0-1000

Table 3 cont.

Means, Standard Deviations and Ranges

of SRRQ Items: Parents with Handicapped Children

Item Number	N	Mean	S.D.	Range
17.	46	257.83	264.17	0-1000
18.	46	520.54	268.50	100-1500
19.	46	584.24	283.99	0-1500
20.	46	402.17	284.21	0-1500
21.	46	390.87	266.47	0-1000
22.	44	696.59	273.10	0-1000
	46	972.83	1527.77	(5,000) (10,000)
23.	45	236.00	227.34	0-1000
24.	44	471.59	236.59	0-1000
	45	683.33	1439.54	(10,000)
25.	45	538.89	294.82	0-1500
26.	44	729.55	287.80	0-1000
	46	1023.91	1518.43	(5,000) (10,000)
27.	46	383.15	227.79	0-1000
28.	46	450.00	262.47	0-1000
29.	46	377.72	197.08	0- 800
30.	44	350.00	238.45	0-1000

Table 3 cont.

Means, Standard Deviations and Ranges

of SRRQ Items: Parents with Handicapped Children

Item Number	N	Mean	S.D.	Range
31.	46	340.00	222.54	0- 800
32.	46	245.65	222.25	0-1000
33.	46	427.17	276.62	0-1000
34.	46	248.33	216.20	0- 800
35.	46	658.15	260.77	100-1000
36.	46	512.50	291.10	0-1500
37.	46	255.21	231.49	0-1000
38.	46	384.78	244.01	0-1000
39.	45	452.22	272.96	0- 800
40.	45	238.26	221.23	0- 800
41.	45	268.77	193.64	0- 750
42.	46	336.95	253.29	0-1000
43.	46	366.30	260.72	0-1000

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Albany, New York 12203

Dear Parent:

We are conducting research on the effects on parents of raising and caring for children with handicapping conditions. Research in this area is scarce and uneven. We would appreciate your cooperation in our efforts to gather systematic, accurate information by completing the following questionnaire.

The questionnaire is one that has been used extensively with adults in the United States. The typical responses of persons who have not had the experience of raising a child with a handicapping condition are known. Your response to this questionnaire will help us to identify the unique experience of the parent of a child with a handicapping condition. This kind of research will lead ultimately to improved support services for such parents.

Please be assured that your response will be completely anonymous.

Sincerely,

Pauline C. Grippin, Ph.D.

Richard Medved, Ed.D.
The College of Saint Rose

Please complete the following:

Parent: Male _____ Female _____ Age _____

Income: Under 10,000 _____ 10,000 to 15,000 _____ Over 15,000 _____

Education: Eighth grade _____ High School _____ College _____

Children (non-handicapped):

Sex _____ Age _____ Sex _____ Age _____ Sex _____ Age _____

Sex _____ Age _____ Sex _____ Age _____ Sex _____ Age _____

Child with handicapping condition:

Male _____ Female _____ Age _____

Condition _____

Instructions for the Social Readjustment Rating Questionaire

1. Social readjustment includes both how much change and how long the the change is felt when one experiences a life event. The change being experienced may be pleasant or unpleasant.

2. You are asked to rate the following life events in terms of how much readjustment they require in a person's life. Some of the experiences you will have had yourself. For life events you have not experienced yourself, give your opinion of how much readjustment they require for other persons who have experienced them. In both cases--your own experience and the experiences of others--strive to give a rating that reflects your opinion of the typical amount of adjustment that life event requires for most people.

3. How to rate: The first life event listed is marriage, and it has been assigned a value of 500 so that you can rate the other listed life events in relation to the amount of adjustment marriage requires. For each event listed, ask yourself, "Does this experience require more or less change than marriage?" "Would the change be felt for a longer or a shorter time than the change felt after marriage?" If you think the change would be greater and/or longer, write a number appropriately larger than 500. If you think the change would be lesser and/or shorter, write a number appropriately smaller than 500. For example, if you thought the change was only a little greater you would write "550" or "600". If you thought the change was twice as great, you'd write "1000." if you thought the change required was very small or none at all, you'd write "0". If you thought the change required was about the same, you'd write "500".

Social Readjustment Rating Scale

Event	Value
1. Marriage	
2. Troubles with the boss	
3. Detention in jail or other institution	
4. Death of spouse	
5. Major change in sleeping habits (a lot more or a lot less sleep, or change in part of day when asleep)	
6. Death of a close family member	
7. Major change in eating habits (a lot more or a lot less food intake, or very different meal hours or surroundings)	
8. Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan	
9. Revision of personal habits (dress, manners, associations, etc.)	
10. Death of a close friend	
11. Minor violations of the law (e.g., traffic tickets, jaywalking, disturbing the peace)	
12. Outstanding personal achievement	
13. Pregnancy	
14. Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	
15. Sexual difficulties	
16. In-law troubles	
17. Major change in number of family get-togethers (e.g., a lot more or a lot less than usual)	
18. Major change in financial state (e.g., a lot worse off or a lot better off than usual)	
19. Gaining a new family member (e.g., through birth, adoption, oldster moving in)	
20. Change in residence	
21. Son or daughter leaving home (e.g., marriage, attending college)	
22. Marital separation from mate	

Event	Value
23. Major change in church activities (e.g., a lot more or a lot less than usual)	_____
24. Marital reconciliation with mate	_____
25. Being fired from work	_____
26. Divorce	_____
27. Changing to a different line of work	_____
28. Major change in the number of arguments with spouse (e.g., either a lot more or lot less than usual regarding child rearing, personal habits)	_____
29. Major change in responsibilities at work (e.g., promotion, demotion, lateral transfer)	_____
30. Wife beginning or ceasing work outside the home	_____
31. Major change in working hours or conditions	_____
32. Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	_____
33. Taking on a mortgage greater than $10,000 (e.g., purchasing a home, business)	_____
34. Taking on a mortgage or loan less than $10,000 (e.g., purchasing a car, TV, freezer)	_____
35. Major personal injury or illness	_____
36. Major business readjustment (e.g., merger, reorganization, bankruptcy)	_____
37. Major change in social activities (e.g., clubs, dancing, movies, visiting)	_____
38. Major change in living conditions (e.g., building a new house, remodeling, deterioration of home or neighborhood)	_____
39. Retirement from work	_____
40. Vacation	_____
41. Christmas	_____
42. Changing to a new school	_____
43. Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	_____